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Reinforced Stereotypes: A Case Study on School Textbooks in Egypt

By Dina Wafa¹

Abstract

Gender equality in access to education may be increasing, yet several studies have indicated that school textbooks tend to be gender biased. These studies have also concluded that there is an associated influence of school textbooks on children's beliefs and values within such textbooks, which has the capacity to reinforce stereotypical roles for women and place a glass ceiling on their empowerment. This paper focuses on the reinforced stereotypical gender roles depicted in primary school textbooks in Egypt, which subconsciously affects girls' self-esteem and stifles their empowerment. It provides a mixed method of analysis of the Egyptian centralized state school textbooks for grades 1 to 3, focusing on the Arabic language. Regardless of the field of study, Arabic is an obligatory course at all schools in Egypt.

Keywords: Reinforced stereotypes, Gender equality, Gender bias, School textbooks, Egypt

Introduction

Achieving gender equality in access to education has been a main focal goal for several agencies and states for several years, and many have achieved pronounced accomplishments. Education as a tool for empowerment is successful when it is able to provide those who are educated with the ability to influence their lives and become self-sufficient. However, when the tool itself is flawed, it may not be as successful in achieving its purpose. Therefore, it is essential that in celebrating such achievements to recognize the possible flaws in our tools. While working to achieve gender equality and to empower women through equal access to education it is essential to observe curricula and textbooks and to ensure that they adequately promote gender parity.

Several studies have signified school textbooks to be gender biased and have associated the influence of textbooks on children's beliefs and values. There appears to be a paradox within education whereas it may be utilized in empowering girls, it may also hinder their capabilities of reaching their full capacities. Numerous cases have highlighted the errors within the education systems that disempower women by continually nurturing patriarchy and schooling girls to conform through reinforced stereotypical messages (Alayan et al; Bettach and Hassan, 2018; Islam and Asadullah, 2018; Jaafari and Cadi, 2018; Ombati and Ombati, 2012; PanWorld, 2017; Perasso, 2017; Stromquist et al, 1998; and Wirtenburg et al 1980).

This study will explore the gender equality dimensions and the disempowering elements in education; studying the paradox of using a flawed education tool to achieve gender equality through a focused study on Egypt. This study will provide a mixed analysis, both qualitative and

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quantitative, of the centralized state textbooks for grades 1 to 3 in the Arabic Language. The Arabic Language curriculum was selected due to its obligatory status to all Egyptian students regardless of the type of school they attend.

The Flawed Tool Hidden in Plain Sight

Empowerment is the process of enhancing individuals' abilities to make choices and become independent. It is "the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights" (Page and Czuba, 1999). It is a multidimensional process that in essence helps individuals gain control over their own lives; and to disempower according to the Webster dictionary is to cause people to be less likely than others to succeed. UN Women describes gender discrimination as when women "end up in insecure, low-wage jobs, and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions [and have limited] access to economic assets ... [and to] participation in shaping economic and social policies" UN Women.

In order to enhance people's abilities to gain control over their lives, various enablers have been identified including education, access to opportunities, resources, policies, laws, and cultural acceptance (UNFPA, 1994). The UNESCO identifies four gender equality dimensions in education:

- equality of access,
- equality in the learning process,
- equality of educational outcomes
- and equality of external results. (UNESCO, 2009).

There have been marked strides on one dimension of gender equality in education: the dimension of equality of access. Several states now boast gender equality in access to education. However, when it comes to the remaining three gender equality dimensions: equality in the learning process, equality of educational outcomes, and equality of external results there is still a lot more to be done.

Numerous states have made great progress in closing the gender gap ensuring equal access to education. Yet the impact on actual empowerment of women, particularly in the Arab world is not that marked. "Despite on-going efforts to increase young women enrolment in schools and access to employment, gender inequalities have been far from eradicated." (Jones and Chant, 2008: 184). According to the SDG tracker, nearly all Arab states have achieved gender equality in education. However, according to the Arab Human Development Report youth face high unemployment rates where specifically fifty per cent of women are unemployed, while for men, it is only twenty per cent (2016). Intriguingly, the Gulf states and Jordan, in particular, seem to have achieved the highest rates of education for women, yet women participation in the labor force, let alone political life is among the lowest in these states (Sika 2011 and OECD, 2017).

The Relationship Between Girls' Educational Experience and Women's Opportunities, Self-Esteem Issues, and Empowerment

Women equality in the labor force, leadership, and political participation is comparatively weaker than that of girls' equality in access to education. Gender gap analysis shows how "qualified women ... [are graduating] out of the education system, [yet] many industries are failing

to hire, retain and promote them” (WEF, 2018 ppv). Several researches refer to cultural, political and social factors as the main reason behind the gender inequity. However, more recently an additional factor has been deliberated and that is the confidence gap. Girls are schooled and conditioned to doubt their abilities throughout their young age. Paradoxically, as states have made progress in equal access to education as an attempt to empower girls; the education tool itself is working to reinforce gender bias through the continuous disempowering messages girls are receiving throughout their years of schooling. In order for girls to gain confidence and have the ability and willingness to seize their rights they need to be nurtured to do so.

According to the OECD women tend to have a general lack of self-confidence (OECD, 2012). There has been a significant progress in equal access to education, yet women still have a long way to go compared to their male-counterparts, when it comes to economic and political participation.

[Women have made significant progress in access to education, yet they still have a long way to go when it comes to] employment, pay equity and pursuing the more so-called ‘masculine’ jobs and positions. The Global Gender Gap Report has shown that worldwide covering 144 countries 96% of educational attainment gap is covered, while only 58% of economic participation and 23% of the political gap have been covered; posing a wide distinction. According to OECD report only 14% of female students entering universities in 2012 chose science-related fields while 39% of their male counterparts were eager to choose science related majors (OECD, 2012).

Increased access to education amongst women has not transmuted employment conditions. Women still suffer low employment rates and have a low representation in both public and private spheres, let alone equal opportunity for leadership in both political and public life. Gender gap analysis have shown how “qualified women are coming out of the education system, many industries are failing to hire, retain and promote them” (WEF, 2018 ppv.). There continues to be a societal expectation that women are the primary caretakers of children and family. According to ILO the world-wide unemployment rate for women is 51% while for men it is as low as 25%. Furthermore, women tend to be overrepresented in vulnerable jobs more than men (ILO, 2018). One of the challenges to women employment mentioned by the ILO is the pressure to conform and that there are still those who believe it is unacceptable for women to have paid jobs outside their home (ILO, 2018).

Women are under-represented in managerial positions on a global level. Furthermore, less than a third of mid to senior level positions held by women in the majority of sixty-seven countries from 2009 to 2015 (UN Sustainable Development Goals). Women in senior roles worldwide is still as low as 24% in 2018 with the still evident glass ceiling setting barriers to women advancement (Catalyst, 2018). And in several cases of the few women who achieve leadership positions they described feeling tension between family responsibilities and work or political participation.

In the Arab world, women are attaining access to education at increasing rates, and in some cases achieving higher results than their male peers, and yet ironically, they are far less likely to enter, remain and succeed in the job market. About three out of four Arab women remain unemployed. Those employed tend to be employed in the more vulnerable informal sectors or the

laxer secure public sector in favor of more nurturance-oriented careers. In Egypt 56% of public employees are women, while in Jordan 52% are women (OECD, 2014).

Nonetheless, women and girls tend to be responsible economic actors whether in paid or in unpaid labor; though they are more represented in the unpaid labor sector and in the informal economy (Chant 2016, Jones and Chant, 2009). In low-income groups, women may also be the main household supporter, yet still subordinate to male dominance (Jones and Chant, 2009). Girls tend to bear the onus of their families “victims of patriarchal culture yet subjects of extraordinary potential” (Chant, 2016 p 322). Young girls would altruistically contribute up to 90 per cent of their income to their family households, as opposed to 35 per cent by young boys (Chant, 2016).

A Focus on School Textbooks

Research has suggested that education may not be directly responsible for empowerment but rather indirectly through influencing self-esteem (Batool and Batool, 2018); and so “since children have limited experiences upon which to make judgments, they are highly susceptible to the influences encountered in their lives” (Wirtenburg et al, 1980 p13). Given that students spend eighty to ninety-five per cent of their classroom time using those textbooks, school textbooks have been identified by the United Nation’s Girl Education Initiative as one of the five greatest challenges toward achieving gender equality in education given since they tend to be stereotypical (Ombati and Ombati, 2012). “A pupil is estimated to read more than 32,000 pages of textbooks from elementary to high school levels ... and around 90% of their homework is done from them” (Perasso 2017). “At the same time that a pupil is learning social studies, mathematics, and reading textbooks are influencing the child’s self-esteem, values, aspirations and fears” (Wirtenburg et al, 1980 p16).

According to CIDA, the school textbook is not designed to shift societal attitudes to empower women, but rather to reinforce gender bias and uphold traditional stereotypes (2010). School textbooks may lead to distorting girls’ self-image and so limit their future career choices. Examination of school curricula reveals that the mention of male characters tend to be more dominant, and they tend to be depicted as working in more economically powerful positions and exercising better judgment; while female mentions are noticeably fewer and tend to be portrayed as subordinate and weaker (Alayan et al; Bettach and Hassan, 2018; Islam and Asadullah, 2018; Jaafari and Cadi, 2018; Ombati and Ombati, 2012; PanWorld, 2017 Perasso, 2017; Stromquist et al, 1998; and Wirtenburg et al, 1980).

In an extensive study in the United States as far back as the 1970s, around 3000 books were reviewed revealing that females were six times more likely to be portrayed as dependent on males (Wirtenburg et al, 1980). Similarly, an overview of some of the Arab school textbooks reveals a heavy gender bias which leads to a continual conditioning of future disempowered gender roles for Arab women. In Morocco, studies of Amazigh language textbooks and of English as a Foreign Language textbooks reveal high gender bias (Bettach and Hassan, 2018; and Jaafari and Cadi, 2018). The frequency of females mentioned in textbooks exhibiting dominant traits (assertive, self-reliant, etc) were 7 in primary 1 (the equivalent of grade 1) and 11 in primary 6 (the equivalent of grade 6) as for males it was 52 and 37 respectively (Bettach and Hassan, 2018). The females tend to exhibit less assertive language and powerlessness in EFL; and the frequency of females exhibiting what are considered ‘female traits’ (nurturing tender etc.) were 30 in primary 1 and 42 in primary 6 as for males it was 8 and 5 respectively (Bettach and Hassan, 2018; and Jaafari and Cadi, 2018). Furthermore, males were mentioned 38 times in high power jobs while females were

mentioned only 11 times in EFL textbooks (Jaafari and Cadi, 2018). Similarly, female to male characters portrayed in the Tunisian textbooks was as low as 30% in 2007 (Perasso, 2017). While a study on the Jordanian textbooks reveals that 29.3% of images are female representations. In job references 10 out of 83 were referenced as female in vocational jobs and 11 of 113 in professional jobs (Alayan et al). The main messages Arab women are subjected to throughout their schooling years tend to be:

- Vocational work is not desirable for women
- Work life will conflict with family life
- Mobility and financial control are not for women
- Work at home is acceptable

The Beijing Declaration in 1995 passed recommendations for developing gender equality promoting curricula and textbooks. The declaration had recognized the influence of the school textbook on society and on women self-belief:

Curricula and teaching materials remain gender-biased to a large degree and are rarely sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women. This reinforces traditional female and male roles that deny women opportunities for full and equal partnership in society. Lack of gender awareness by educators at all levels strengthens existing inequities between males and females by reinforcing discriminatory tendencies and undermining girls' self-esteem (UN Women, 1995 p45).

The CEDAW has also recommended in Article 10 section (c) promoting gender equity through:

The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education ... by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods (UNOHCR, 1978).

A number of scholars emphasize the need to reform other structural and interactional elements in addition to the school curricula and textbooks to reinforce gender equity. These include teacher attitudes, personnel gender composition, disciplinary policies regarding violence and harassment, which all contribute to the building up of character and conditioning for future attitudes and roles (Connell, 1996; Eder, 1995; Johnson-Hanks, 2006; Leach, 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Stromquist, 2006, Wirtenburg et al, 1980), and consequently work on remedying the flawed tool.

Promoting gender sensitive messages in education is a necessary tool for the empowerment of women and for increasing their self-confidence. The preparation the children receive from their textbooks is also said to influence their career choices (Wirtenburg et al, 1980). Recognizing this, several states have taken steps to correct the current failings. Some Nordic countries have even gone to extremes through reverse discriminatory representation of women in school textbooks in an attempt to encourage them to seek roles higher than what they actually see around them (Eurydice, 2010).

Case Study and Research Design

National curricula are used in majority school systems in the Arab world. These curricula are generally more focused on learning knowledge rather than developing critical thinking. Furthermore, the curriculum tends to be gender biased further reinforcing stereotypes and conditioning women to a limited role in society. School curricula tend to show lack of gender sensitive language, and students are exposed to constant messages promoting that women should stay at home for better family cohesion, women are unable to take decisions or manage finances, and there are only a few limited professions which may be acceptable for females (Abu Jaber, 2014, OECD, 2017 Sika, 2011).

The continuous conditioning and stereotyped schooling reflect on behavior as a study on Egyptian youth revealed that 50% of boys aged 10-12 reported participating in domestic work compared with only 20% of boys aged 16-19. In contrast, the domestic work participation rates for girls, higher to begin with, remain constant over time. (Mensch, et al., 2000) This shows that conditioning and continuous gendered messages may impact behavior.

This study will provide a mixed analysis, of the centralized state national curricula textbooks for grades 1 to 3 in the Arabic Language in Egypt. Arabic Language curriculum was selected due to its obligatory status to all Egyptian students regardless of the type of school they attend, whether private or public. Therefore, it is a cross-cutting study on the initial years of schooling for students. Each textbook is analyzed using both a quantitative analysis and a qualitative analysis.

The quantitative analyses focus on frequency of:

- Visual representation
- Gender of authors

The qualitative analyses focus on:

- Gender sensitive language
- Division of labor
- Depiction (brave, intelligent, etc.) and gender of leading characters

Results of the Analysis

Visual Representation

A quantitative analysis was conducted on all Arabic language textbooks for grades 1 to 3 to observe the frequency of gender pictorial representation and the percentage of representation of each gender. Ideally, pictorial representation should be 50% pictures of females and 50% pictures of males. Table 1 below presents the main findings:

Table 1

Textbook	Male		Female	
	Observed Visual Frequency	Observed %	Observed Visual Frequency	Observed %
Arabic Grade 1 Semester 1	209	66%	108	34%
Arabic Grade 1 Semester 2	109	64.5%	60	35.5%
Arabic Grade 2 Semester 1	50	79%	13	21%
Arabic Grade 2 Semester 2	79	74%	28	26%
Arabic Grade 3 Semester 1	135	77%	41	23%
Arabic Grade 3 Semester 2	160	69%	73	31%

Visual analysis shows observed male dominance in the frequency as pictures of males is continuously close to double and in some cases triple that of pictures of females. In all cases females do not reach their 50% representation expectancy; the highest representation of females is observed in grade 1 textbooks – 34% and 35.5%. Both males and females are represented on the covers of textbooks for grades 1 and 2. However, grade 3 textbooks have only males represented on the cover page. Moreover, male pictures are found at all headings and subheadings.

Gender of Author(s) of Textbooks and of Poems Within Textbooks

A quantitative analysis was conducted on all Arabic language textbooks for grades 1 to 3 to observe the gender of authors in control of textbooks and of poems inserted within textbooks. Table 2 below presents the main findings:

Table 2

Textbook	Male		Female	
	Authors	Poem authors - poets	Authors	Poem authors - poets
Arabic Grade 1 Semester 1	5	0	0	0
Arabic Grade 1 Semester 2	5	0	0	0
Arabic Grade 2 Semester 1	5	3	0	0
Arabic Grade 2 Semester 2	5	3	0	0
Arabic Grade 3 Semester 1	5	3	1	0
Arabic Grade 3 Semester 2	5	3	1	0

Gender bias is evident. In book authorship only one female author is represented only in grade 3, and none in grades 1 and 2; while 5 male authors have been represented in all grades 1 to 3. Furthermore, all poets of all 12 poems are male.

Gender Sensitive Language

A qualitative analysis was conducted on all Arabic language textbooks for grades 1 to 3 to observe the language used, and whether it bore any gender sensitive connotations. All the textbooks language is mainly male centered.

Division of Labor

This part of the study is observing how women were portrayed and in what occupation as opposed to men. Throughout the textbooks, women were shown as teachers, cleaning and cooking, while males were shown as policemen, fishermen, laborers, soldiers, doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists, gardeners and cleaners. The pictures do not seem to give much variety to what women can do compared to their male counterparts. Women seem to be confined to a nurturing role.

Depiction (Brave, Intelligent, etc.) and Leading Characters

This part of the study observes depiction and leading characters. The findings are divided into male dominance findings, equal representation findings, and female dominance findings presented below:

- Male dominance: Grade 2 textbooks have stories of a brave boy, and a boy who was awarded best student, and stories of a father and a grandfather giving advice. In grade 3 stories of a boy who is applauded for his idea, a story of a king, a story of a boy and his father, a story of a boy, and of a girl who asks her grandfather for advice, and a story on male workers.
- Equal representation: In grade 3 a story on a boy and girl together solving a problem, a story of a family sharing labor and thinking of ideas together
- Female dominance: In grade 3 a story of a girl painting and another one of a woman weaving. The only dominance here is that in both cases the leading character is female. However, if their representation is in an empowered role or in an empowering role to influence future generations is not clear. Also, there are two other stories where the mother is seen to give sound advice on electricity and food preservation. Again, the dominance is that in both cases a female character is seen as giving advice.

There is a reinforced stereotyping of roles as female dominance or equal representation is either questionable or again in a nurturing role. Whereas, male dominance is portrayed in more admirable (best student), wise (giving advice and applauded for ideas), and in a leadership role (king).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Many states have made notable strides in achieving gender equality in access to education. Yet, closing the gender gap in education attainment has proved to be insufficient in promoting women empowerment. Women face challenges in equal access to employment, to economic independence, and to political participation. Several researches refer to cultural, political and social factors as the main reason behind the gender inequity. However, more recently an additional factor has been deliberated and that is the confidence gap. Women are schooled and conditioned to doubt their abilities throughout their young age.

There continues to be a cultural perception that women are the main caretakers and are not as equal to their male counterparts in decision making and in taking up powerful positions. This is reinforced throughout school education years, as school textbooks continue to condition a patriarchal society. Empowerment of women is not only attained through equal access to education but also through promoting gender sensitive messages and ensuring the proper gender balanced building up of character and conditioning for future attitudes and roles for both women and men.

Young students at a very early age are exposed to gender stereotypes in textbooks that tend to nurture gender bias and distort women's self-image, limiting their future career choices. During their schooling years young girls are conditioned that females may have much fewer choices than their male counterparts, and that they may be better suited to more nurturing roles. Not only female students' self-esteem is affected, but also male students are conditioned to think of women in a certain framework. This reproduces a highly patriarchal society.

This study on Arabic textbooks for Grades 1 to 3 in Egypt, found a high degree of gender stereotypes in language sensitivity, gender representation, and the quality gender of representation in the sampled textbooks. Language sensitivity may be tricky to tackle as the Arabic language is a heavily gendered language that differentiates between males and females in the noun, verb, and adjective forms of words. Compared to the English language where de-gendering is comparably very simple, the Arabic language is heavily gendered, and not as easily de-gendered. Any alteration

in the Arabic language would simply be grammatically incorrect (Washington, 2018). When speaking in the plural the default is male, unless we are referring to a group of females only. When gender is not specified the default is male. Genderless address is quite impossible in the Arabic language, and therefore it is necessary to consciously insert female only references to counter the male dominance; and to do so continuously to ensure proper representation.

Gender representation and quality of gender representation in textbooks is attainable through text-books audits. On observing the textbooks, female characters were mostly associated in a derogative role, while males were represented in more dominant roles. Female characters were only portrayed as teachers, whereas males enjoyed a large variety of portrayals including that of policeman, fisherman, labor man, soldier, doctor, teacher, engineer, and scientist. Furthermore, female characters tend to be confined in nurturing roles while male characters are portrayed in more admirable (best student), wise (giving advice and applauded for ideas), and in a leadership role (king).

Paradoxically, as observed, even with female participation in textbook authorship, gender stereotypes continued. This may be justified by the gender imbalance in authorship and more importantly to the deeply embedded gender biases that the authors have been exposed to. Nevertheless, initiating a gender audit on textbooks to ensure that curricula are not reinforcing stereotypes and continuing to reproduce patriarchy is necessary. It may not be an easy task as changing the curricula is an expensive ordeal that usually occurs in cases of extreme changes in the political or social environment. However, it is necessary to achieve the sought-after empowerment of women and gender balance.

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